Irish in Australia Demand Freedom for Erin

By J. GRATTAN GREY

Melbourne, Australia, December—(By Mail).

MONDAY, November 3, 1919, long will be remembered as the day and date of the most important event that has yet occurred in the historical annals of the Irish race at the antipodes. People of Irish birth and descent assembled in thousands to proclaim their earnest sympathy and co-operation with the people of Ireland in their demand for self-determination in the government of their own country.

Convened by the Most Reverend Dr. Mannix, Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne, the Irish-Race Convention could not have been more thoroughly representative of the whole of Australasia, lay and clerical. Specially appointed delegates poured into Melbourne from every part of the Australian Continent, from the far-off Dominion of New Zealand and from the island state of Tasmania, which was intimately associated with Ireland in the days when, known by its original name of Van Diemens Land, it was the place of enforced exile of such self-sacrificing Irish patriots as William Smith O'Brien, John Mitchell, John Martin, Thomas Francis Meagher (after his escape to America, known there as Meagher of the Sword), and other transported leaders of the 1848 movement; and in later times of John Boyle O'Reilly and other prominent Irishmen connected with the Fenian rising, who were sent to Tasmania, and some also to Western Australia, under various sentences.

Altogether, about two thousand delegates gravitated to Melbourne, accompanied by members of the whole Australasian hierarchy—archbishops, bishops, deans, priests, college professors in holy orders and secular, bringing in their train Irishmen from all points of the compass who, although not officially appointed delegates, desired to take part in this monster demonstration on behalf of their native land.

And let there be no misapprehension about the matter. Although for the greater part essentially Catholic in its composition, the huge demonstration was so divested of any purely religious or sectarian attributes that thousands of Irish Protestants, many of them natives of Ulster or descendants of Ulstermen, raised their voices, both at the convention and at the great open-air assemblage in the evening, in support of the resolutions which voiced the Australasian sentiment of self-determination for Ireland.

A few weeks before, the announcement was made by the Most Reverend Dr. Mannix that the convention would be of the greatest importance to all interested in the Irish question.

"If public opinion counts for anything," he said, "the convention is going to give Lloyd George and those associated with him in England something to think about. If they fail to hear the voice of the convention, the people participating in it will never settle down to perfect peace till justice is done to that little country to which they owe so much.

"When America voiced an opinion on self-determination for Ireland, Sir Edward Carson said she ought to mind her own business. Englishmen did not tell America to mind her own business when they were running away before the Germans, calling to America for assistance. Then they were mute and plausible. He did not know whether America was minding her own business when she came into the war, but she certainly was when endeavoring to bring John Bull to his duty. If the public opinion of the Commonwealth and of the Dominion of New Zealand and of South Africa is to count for anything, Mr. Lloyd George and some other people in England will, as a result of the convention, have plenty of food for thought. It will be, without doubt, the most representative meeting yet held in Australia. If those people in London refuse to listen to the demand of the Irish-Race Convention, then those people can take it for granted that the people of Australia, of America, and of South Africa will never settle down to perfect peace till justice has been done to Ireland. Not only are the people of America and of South Africa hostile to England, but there is not one of the small nations which is favorable to her, or would take part with her against Ireland."

IT WAS at first intended that the convention should meet in the Cathedral Hall, but large as it is, it was considered to be too small to accommodate the two thousand delegates and the thousands of others who were anxious to be present. Therefore the spacious Auditorium in Collins street was procured for the purpose. I was fortunate in being one of those to whom invitations were issued by Archbishop Mannix. I say fortunate, because I would not have missed such an exhibition of downright earnestness and fervent patriotism for more than I can tell, to say nothing of the exceptional flow of oratory and the outbursts of cheering that frequently took place when telling points were made by the speakers. The whole atmosphere of the convention brought vividly to my mind my personal recollections of that great convention in the Round Room of the Rotunda, in Dublin, toward the end of 1900, when John Redmond was appointed leader of the Irish Parliamentary party in the British House of Commons.

Arriving at the Auditorium, a considerable time in advance of the hour fixed for the opening of the convention, I found pouring into the building as fast as the crowded condition of the entrances would permit, a stream of orderly and well-dressed men and women which bore a considerable resemblance to the crowd I saw just nineteen years ago streaming into the Round Room of the historic Rotunda to take part in the national demand for Home Rule and the election of Redmond, upon the healing of the split in the Irish party to the position of leadership formerly held by such men as Parnell, Isaac Butt, Vincent Scully and Justin McCarthy. Things have changed a good deal since then upon the Irish question, alike in Ireland itself and throughout Australasia. In both hemispheres, the demand is no longer simply for Home Rule, but for independence and self-determination for Ireland. There, as in Australasia, the claim for independence is based not only upon racial and geographical grounds sufficient in themselves to confer upon Ireland a distinct and separate nationality, but also upon the results of the parliamentary elections in Ireland last December, and upon the repeated declarations made during the war and after the signing of the armistice, that one of the objects of the war was to secure self-determination for the smaller nations. Therefore, the people of Ireland and their kindred in Australasia call upon the Allies and the United States to prove the sincerity of their declaration by granting self-determination to Ireland, which has a stronger claim upon the bestowal of such a grant than those smaller nations to which self-determination has been given, although they do not, like Ireland, stand alone in the midst of an ocean, but are created by the disruption of two central empires which have emerged from the war so disastrous for themselves.

To the strains of the band stationed in front of the Auditorium, playing "The Wearing of the Green" and other national airs, the swelling crowd continued slowly to work its way into the building until there was not a vacant foot of space left even for standing room in the passages. On the ground floor every seat had its occupant, and the two galleries overhead (one above the other), reserved principally for the accommodation of women, were filled to their capacity. Many hundreds were unable to obtain admission.

As the procession ascended the stairway, and those forming it took the places allotted to them on the spacious stage, the whole audience rose to its feet and sang "God Save Ireland" with great precision and enthusiastic earnestness. Then followed a most telling and eloquent opening address by Archbishop Mannix, which he began by saying that they were assembled there for a declared and definite purpose—to support Ireland's claim as expressed at the last general election in Ireland. This was no time for halting words or balanced phrases, he said. They were with the Irish people or against them. They would help them openly or leave them to their fate. They were not there through hate of any land or any people, no matter how deeply they and their fathers had been wronged. They were there for love of Ireland. In pleading Ireland's cause they claimed that they were helping to remove the blackest stain upon the Empire to which these southern lands belonged, and for whose honor and existence they had fought. The Irish question was not a mere Imperial matter, much less a domestic question for British politicians to temporize with and wrangle about. It was a question in which America and the nations were vitally interested, and with which the lasting peace of the world was very intimately bound up. Ireland and Irish Australia had no reason to be ashamed of the chairman either as Premier of Queensland or as the prospective Prime Minister of the Commonwealth.

England was equally bound by every obligation of honor and of gratitude to listen when Australia and New Zealand demanded freedom for Ireland. They fought side by side with England for the Empire. They fought for the freedom of the Belgians and the Poles and the Jugo-Slavs, but 60,000 Australians and other thousands of New Zealanders did not give their blood and their lives that Ireland's chains might be more firmly riveted than ever. They were there to support the policy which the Irish people adopted deliberately and with striking unanimity at the last general election. For them to attempt to revise that policy or to suggest an alternative would be an impertinence at any time, but especially now, when self-determination—which was really Sinn Feinism—was on everybody's lips. Ireland claimed the right to live her own life and shape her own destiny without interference from outside. She stood apart in blood and race, soul and ideals. Ireland's right to walk her own way unfettered did not come from President Wilson or the "Big Four," and it could not be taken from her either in Paris or in Washington. Ireland under English rule never had any inducement to part with her nationhood. Her faith was banned, her trade was stifled, her people impoverished, buried in paupers' graves, or driven as exiles to the ends of the earth. She was ruled with a rod of iron in the interests of a petted minority, alien in blood and faith and sympathy. Was it any wonder that in these circumstances every generation in Ireland had its own armed uprising, in which Ireland fell back, bled and exhausted, yet not subdued or repentant, but sullen and expectant of another opportunity and a better day. At the present moment they were told that the King's Writ did not run in Ireland, and that the Irish people were no more reconciled to English rule than they were in the days of Oliver Cromwell of pious memory.

At the present moment it took 100,000 British troops to keep up the pretense of maintaining English rule, and in the face of this what was England's answer? Either more tanks and machine guns, or else the promise—a promise from those by whom Ireland had been many times betrayed—of some paltry concession, provided that it met with the approval of that small minority in whose interests Ireland was held and tortured. English rule in Ireland was condemned by its fruits. Those who knew the true significance of Easter Week and of the present military domination in Ireland would be ready to say, although they had no special sympathy with Ireland, that the time had passed when the world should tolerate this tragedy of English rule in Ireland. At all events, Ireland had turned her back upon beggarly concessions and halting and blundering attempts to mitigate the evils of foreign and hostile rule. Her objection was—this he said deliberately—not really to bad government from outside, but to any government from inside. Her motto was "Ireland a nation, self-governed, peaceful, reliant, progressive, friendly with all nations without exception, seeking no quarrel with any of them, but brooking no interference from them in her own national affairs."

President Wilson said that there ought to be no lasting peace that "does not accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed." That was Ireland's case in a nutshell. On that principle Ireland based her claim for self-determination, and for the indictment she laid against England, to which indictment England had offered no answer but the rattle of English guns. Must it be said, in spite of all our godly posturing, that, after all, might still was right when might was in British arms and Ireland had no stronger weapon than a righteous cause? England, knowing that she had no case, barred the door of the Peace Conference against Ireland, and once again "might was right," and that at the Conference which was to end all wars as well as the martyrdom of the weak nations. For more than 700 years England had been made to feel that Ireland was a nation. English politicians had tried every means of extinguishing the national spirit, but on their own confession they were no nearer to success than in the days of Oliver Cromwell. They were so solicitous for Ireland's welfare that they feared that Ireland could not stand alone—that Ireland could not do without her fairy godmother—who had been squandering her wealth to support her poor relation. Ireland had counted the cost, and she would take the risk and relieve the fairy godmother of her self-imposed task.

THEY pretended to believe that in an independent Ireland the Protestant minority would be made to suffer. Their susceptibilities for minorities elsewhere were not so keen and tender, but Irish Catholics had this to their credit—that they had never persecuted their fellow-countrymen for conscience' sake. They said that England could not tolerate at her very door the setting up of a free, independent and probably hostile state. That argument they could also understand, but they marveled at the audacity in bringing it forward. It meant once more that where England was concerned might was right; that, being a strong nation, she had the right to seize any territory that she thought would give her greater security in her island home or in her far-reaching dominions. It would give her the right to seize, if she were able, and fortify the Belgian and the French coasts, as well as the Irish. There was no reason for thinking that an independent Irish republic would be hostile to England, or to any other nation. Even if she were, those who were so insistent on the League of Nations, and so hopeful of its results, might have had the fairness to admit that a league that was going to keep the whole world in order would be able to shield England from the attacks of her little neighbor, and to keep that little island in the Atlantic in order.

The fact was that Ireland, like Australia, was a peace-loving country. In war and in peace, in working for material good, or in facing a common danger, England could surely expect more help from a friendly independent neighbor than from a hostile Ireland held down by force, from a sullen Ireland, within the Empire but not of it. England, or rather English politicians, had laid down the principle that Ireland could not have the benefit of any act for her better government, unless that act had the approval of a certain small minority in the northeast corner of Ireland. By adopting that principle, or because so many of England's politicians adopted it, England had put Ireland outside the British Constitution. In acting in this undemocratic manner England had not merely abased herself, but had violated the root principles of the British Constitution. By her own deliberate act England had now placed Ireland outside the pale of the British Constitution; and, having done so, England was surprised that she was taken at her word.

At the conclusion of Archbishop Mannix's address, the immense audience rose and, waving hats and handkerchiefs, cheered the popular prelate for several minutes. Then the Archbishop invited the ex-Premier of Queensland, Mr. T. J. Ryan, to take the chair, and that gentleman was vociferously cheered on doing so. He made a very eloquent speech, punctuated from time to time, by loud cheers and concluded by calling upon Archbishop Redwood, of Wellington, New Zealand, to move the first resolution.

Archbishop Redwood was accorded a most enthusiastic reception. He said that although he was an Englishman he was, on the Irish question, by conviction and sentiment, as Irish as the best Irish themselves. He knew the lamentable story of Ireland's wrongs and woes for many centuries at the hands of the misgovernment of England. By England he meant the government, not the English people at large. The vast majority of Englishmen had been craftily and systematically kept in the dark regarding Ireland. They were helpless victims of a false tradition, of accumulated lies and misrepresentations for centuries. At the back of the misgoverning gang in England there had been the venal and corrupt press misleading the people, and at the same time there had been a suppression of every argument for Ireland's right of self-determination and national independence. All good Australians ought to be Sinn Feiners. We were told that the object of the war was the utter destruction of Prussianism, but the small nation at England's door was the goaded victim of the most barefaced and outrageous Prussianism that was ever known. He begged to move the first resolution, in which was incorporated that the "delegates to the Australasian Irish-Race Convention, assembled in Melbourne, affirm the right of the people of Ireland to choose their own form of government, and to govern their country without interference from any other nation."